People wear masks largely so they won’t be recognized. When characters wear masks in plays, however, that fact is complicated a bit because in doing so they are usually not hiding from us, the audience. The characters on stage in Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night* might think that they are interacting with someone named Cesario, but the audience knows it is really Viola in disguise. Exploring the implications of this irony has of course been the stock in trade of a good deal of critical commentary and controversy from Shakespeare’s time until the present. I would like to narrow the parameters of this vast subject by looking at a single play, *Measure for Measure*, and by bringing in what would seem to be an unlikely ally: a canto from Dante’s *Inferno* where masks and unmasking play a significant part, and where intriguing parallels can be found between the Duke of Vienna in Shakespeare, and the “character” who tells his story in Dante, a friar named Guido da Montefeltro. That both of these cases involve friars testifies to the ongoing life of the friar as a literary commonplace, and suggests that to more fully appreciate what they can unfold, knowledge of the Franciscan tradition is more than helpful.¹

In *Measure for Measure* the Duke of Vienna goes underground wearing an interesting mask: the Habit of a Friar. He puts on his “mask” in Act 1 and keeps it on until Act 5. There, in the last scene of the play, in one of the great recognition moments in dramatic literature, he is unmasked by the play’s resident wild man, a character (in both senses of the word) named Lucio, who has spent much of his time on stage insulting the Duke in the presence of the Duke

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¹ One of the key moments in my forty years of co-teaching, co-authoring, and co-lecturing with Bill Cook came in 1975, the first time that we brought Geneseo students to Assisi to study the basilica, and more specifically the frescoes on the life of Francis in the Upper Church. The course we were teaching was “The Age of Dante,” and from that time on, Dante and Francis became inescapably linked for me. This essay can serve as a testimony that the linkage is still going strong, and that my decades long association with Il Cook has carried me to some unexpected places. Parts of this essay were originally presented, in a much more colloquial form, as the Keynote Address at the Conference on Masks and Carnival sponsored by the University of Florida Center for Medieval and Early Modern Studies. I would like to thank Professor Mary Alexandra Watt for the invitation and for her hospitality.
himself, that is to say, to the Duke in disguise, whom he sees only as a friar. With no evidence at all, for example, he presents the Duke as yet another example of the sexual profligacy that is epidemic in Vienna.

Duke: You are pleasant sir, and speak apace.
Lucio: Why what a ruthless thing is this in him, for the rebellion of a codpiece, to take away the life of a man! Would the Duke that is absent have done this? Ere he would have hanged a man for the getting a hundred bastards, he would have paid the nursing a thousand. He had some feeling for the sport; he knew the service, and that instructed him to mercy.

... the greater file of the subject held the Duke to be wise.
Duke: Wise? Why no question that he was.
Lucio: A very superficial, ignorant, unweighing fellow.2

Measure for Measure, 3.2.110–117; 131–136

It is one of the many great ironies of the play that it is Lucio himself who unwittingly unmasks the Duke at the end of the play, and he realizes in one of his few moments of insight that the results of this recognition “may prove worse than a hanging” (5.1.368).

There is a false friar in Dante’s Inferno, who also wears a mask of sorts, and who is also “unmasked” as he reveals himself to Dante the pilgrim in the depths of hell. In Canto 27 of the Inferno, Dante the pilgrim encounters Guido da Montefeltro, who also tells us about putting on the habit of a friar. His goal is a little more presumptuous than that of Shakespeare’s Duke. The Duke wants to bring order back to Vienna, and, perhaps of equal importance, find out what life is like in a steamy and sordid world of the Viennese underclass far from his own life of privilege and power. He knows that if he decides to wander through his city in propria persona people will tell him what they always tell rulers: they will tell him what they think he wants to hear. In disguise he has a much better chance of finding out the real story about the corruption that is rampant in Vienna.3 Dante’s Guido da

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3 For a very different recent reading of the complexity of the Duke’s motives, including a subtle and interesting analysis of their sinister side, see Sarah Beckwith, “Medieval Penance, Reformation Repentance, and Measure for Measure,” in Reading the Medieval in Early Modern England, eds. Gordon McMullan and David Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 193–204. Her analysis relates penitential practices in Early Modern England to the various “Confessions” that take place toward the end of the play, seeing the Duke as part